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Skulking to War in Central America

Reagan Has Us on a Course That Defies History and Law

"This is an act violating international law. It is an act of war."

—Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) in a letter to CIA Director William J. Casey, April 10, 1984, objecting to the mining of Nicaraguan ports

By ALAN CRANSTON

President Reagan is, indeed, preparing for war in Central America. Lengthy Senate debate over emergency military aid to Nicaraguan *contras* and the Salvadoran government, and the record of growing U.S. involvement in the fighting there, make that fact clear.

For 30 long months we were helping to wage a "secret" war against Nicaragua. Now the secret is out. Goldwater disclosed that President Reagan personally authorized the CIA to assist Nicaraguan rebels in mining ports off the coasts of Nicaragua.

Ships from six nations, including our allies and the Soviet Union, have been damaged by the magnetic floating mines.

The Senate, which had approved Administration requests for emergency assistance for El Salvador and the Nicaraguan *contras* suddenly found itself unwittingly supporting what Goldwater described as "an act of war."

The Senate balked and the Administration backed off, accepting a Senate and subsequent House rebuke in a resolution that said that no funds appropriated by Congress could be used for mining operations. The resolution is non-binding, but the State Department claims that the United States will have no role in the mining operations. The anti-Sandinistas, however,

say that the mining operations will continue, and there are allegations that the CIA is trying to get other nations to participate.

It has been disclosed that three months before the mining, the CIA directed a sabotage raid against the Nicaraguan port of Corinto, destroying 3.2 million gallons of fuel and forcing the town's evacuation—an action that is hard to reconcile with the Administration's claim that its only aim is to interdict military supplies from Nicaragua to Salvadoran rebels.

The "secret" war—and the Administration's not-so-secret preparations for war—go on in other ways.

At his April 4 press conference President Reagan, complaining about restraints of the War Powers Act of 1973 and congressional criticism of the failed U.S. military mission in Lebanon, said: "Maybe General MacArthur was right. There is no substitute for (military) victory."

Evidently, the President is not prepared to settle for another stalemate like Iran, Lebanon, Vietnam or Korea. Grenada is his model—the use of overwhelming U.S. force for a quick knockout victory when "other means" have failed.

His "other means"—mining of harbors, arming of Nicaraguan terrorists, extended military and naval maneuvers and tough diplomatic warnings—are failing in Central America. Nicaragua's Sandinista government has not been overthrown, nor have its policies changed; and the revolutionary war by Salvadoran leftists against the ruling regime has not been deterred.

President Reagan has failed to halt the bloodshed in Central America. He has done

nothing to alleviate the grinding poverty that has fed the flames of revolt against a century of harsh rule of local oligarchies, or to ease the economic domination and exploitation by U.S. and other foreign interests.

Fred C. Ikle, undersecretary of Defense for policy planning and head of a contingency war plan group for Central America, said in a speech last September: "Let me make this clear to you. We do not seek a military defeat for our friends. We do not seek a military stalemate. We seek victory for the forces of democracy."

The "victory" the Administration seeks is clearly a military one; the "forces of democracy" the Administration thinks it sees in Central America are embodied in the repressive government of El Salvador.

In January, the President's Bipartisan Commission on Central America recommended \$400 million in new military assistance to El Salvador, warning Nicaragua that "force remains an ultimate recourse" for the United States. Its so-called peace plan, which includes \$8 billion in military and economic aid, is a blueprint for continued warfare, not peace.

President Reagan, perhaps recognizing the futility of asking Congress to add another \$8 billion to the \$200-billion budget deficit, has ignored the so-called Kissinger plan in favor of his real interest—covert and overt military action to intimidate, neutralize and, if necessary, overwhelm the Sandinistas and the Salvadoran rebels.

This Administration is prepared for direct U.S. military involvement in the region. The press reported on April 8 that the Reagan Administration is drawing contingency plans "for the possible use of U.S. combat troops in Central America, if the current strategy for defeating leftist forces in the region fails."

Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger denied the report, but another story two days later reiterated the allegation. Secretary of State George P. Shultz then wrote a carefully crafted letter to Congress declaring that the Administration has no plans to "invade" any Central American country. I wrote to Shultz April 12 asking if the Administration is considering sending U.S.

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2.

combat forces to Central America if El Salvador, Honduras or some other country in the region requests it—which would not, technically, constitute an “invasion.” I have not yet received a reply.

Little more than a year ago, Reagan was assuring the nation that he would not “Americanize” the war in El Salvador. We had about 50 U.S. military personnel in the country at that time and about 30 in neighboring Honduras. Today there are nearly 3,000 U.S. troops in Honduras as part of a sustained, coordinated U.S. military buildup in Central America.

Under the guise of an extraordinary series of “exercises,” the Pentagon has rotated thousands of troops through Honduras, and has been building a semi-permanent military infrastructure without Congress’ permission to station troops or build bases. Recently, there have been military exercises involving thousands of U.S. and Honduran troops, with more planned. Aircraft carriers, a nuclear-powered cruiser and other armed vessels regularly patrol the Nicaraguan coast.

Feeding on U.S. military largess, Honduras is rapidly being converted into a permanent U.S. garrison state, and is the principal launching pad for terrorist forays against Sandinistas by *contras* and exiled Somoza guardsmen. An estimated 8,000 CIA-supported Nicaraguan exiles are based in Honduras.

President Reagan should not delude himself that military force alone will work. Milton S. Eisenhower (President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s brother), who served as special ambassador for Latin American affairs from 1957 to 1960, warned in 1963 that “the terrible realization has dawned” on the people of Latin America . . . “the futility of their lives and that of their parents’ lives need not have been, that it is the bitter fruit of an evil system of justice. And so they are filled with a fury and a determination to change the future.”

The United States cannot and must not perpetuate the errors of our violent past in Latin America—the wars against Mexico and Cuba; the invasions of Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and Grenada; the support of dictators and tyrants like Fulgencio Batista, Rafael Trujillo and Anastasio Somoza; and the toppling of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala and Salvador Allende in Chile.

There are effective alternatives. The Contadora nations of Venezuela, Colombia, Panama and Mexico—which I visited last August with Rep. Esteban Torres (D-La Puente)—have offered a 21-point program for a negotiated peace, social order and economic development for Central America. The leaders of all five Contadora nations told Torres and me that Reagan Administration actions undermine the Contadora effort.

The Reagan Administration takes the “great power” view that the United States alone will make the basic decisions in Central America because it sees in that region a threat “from pole to pole” by Cuba and the Soviet Union.

President Reagan is blind-sided by his compulsion to see every problem everywhere in the world as an East-West confrontation rather than symptomatic of longstanding local conditions.

He would do well to heed the insight of Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, who has noted: “The source of change in Latin America is not in Moscow or Havana; it is in history.”

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